



An analysis of students' decision-making process in case of exchange programmes

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Abstract

Learning mobility is a key priority because of its impacts analysed by a number of studies. International education is becoming increasingly competitive with a growing importance of branding within educational institutions. Member states of the EU have been invited to increase the attractiveness of their higher education institutions, and several research studies have concluded that mobility should be better promoted. The aim of this paper is thus to analyse a student's decision-making process on exchange programmes in order to help improve the marketing communications of a university. Eight individual surveys were carried out in order to understand how students decide on where to study abroad. The results of this study illustrate how to effectively use information sources within a university communications strategy and how to design a creative strategy.

Keywords

Decision-making process, Erasmus programme, exchange programmes, information sources, marketing communications, student mobility.

JEL Classification: M31, M37

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1. Introduction

The Council of the EU has concluded that learning mobility, particularly in higher education, is a key priority to overcome the recent recession and to contribute to the achievement of the objectives set out in the Lisbon Strategy by helping build a knowledge-intensive society. Learning mobility can strengthen the professional and personal development of young people and make education institutions more open, more international, more accessible and more efficient. Rather than being the exception, learning mobility should become a natural feature of European studies. There is clear consensus in support of the objective of expanding mobility opportunities for young people; the question now is how to boost these opportunities best.

There have been many research studies on the topic of exchange programmes, frequently concentrating on analysing the impacts of learning mobility. Keogh

and Russel-Roberts (2009) proved that mobility leads to a diffusion of knowledge and skills between countries. The study titled The impact of Erasmus on European higher education (2008) explored the impact of the Erasmus programme on quality improvements in European higher education in teaching, research and student services with a focus on the institutional and system level. Bracht et al. (2006) within the VALERA project (Value of Erasmus mobility) established the impact of mobility on mobile students and teachers' careers. Meanwhile, Teichler (2004) grouped and reconsidered information from several long-term research studies on the impacts of the Erasmus programme in order to report on students' choices and their lives abroad.

Several studies have concluded that learning mobility should be better promoted. The aim of this paper is thus to analyse a student's decision-making process in case of exchange programmes in order to better

understand the demand side and, ultimately, design effective communications for a university. The focus is on supporting incoming student mobility. The analysis concentrates specifically on the situation in the Faculty of Economics, VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava; however, some of its conclusions can be applied to universities in general. This paper takes into consideration the short-term (3–12 months) transnational mobility of students in higher education for studies (not placements) usually carried out under programmes such as Erasmus, CEEPUS and others.

In this paper, the current situation, the aims of the EU and the expected future trends in student mobility are described. Then, the methodology of eight individual surveys carried out for the purpose of this analysis and the research results are presented. Finally, we describe the implications of designing marketing communications for a university and draw conclusions.

2. Background

The character of the development of European education has been shaped by the Lisbon Strategy and the Bologna Process. The objective of the Lisbon Strategy is to make the EU the world's most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustaining growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. The goals of the Lisbon Strategy and their implications for higher education are closely linked with the objectives of the Bologna Process and the drive to create a European Higher Education Area.¹

The overall basis for European cooperation in education and training is set out in the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020') adopted in 2009. Concerning the first strategic objective – Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality – it is mentioned that *as an essential element of lifelong learning and an important means of enhancing people's employability and adaptability, mobility for learners, teachers and teacher trainers should be gradually expanded with a view to making periods of learning abroad – both within Europe and the wider world – the rule rather than the exception* (Council of the European Union, 2009).

In 2009, the Commission published a Green Paper on promoting the learning mobility of young people with the aim of opening up the debate on how best to boost opportunities for young people to be mobile. One of the questions it addressed was *what can be*

done to better promote and motivate young people to be mobile (Commission of the European Communities, 2009). The final report of The impact of Erasmus on European higher education (2008) also recommended to *better promote Erasmus exchange and mobility*.

The recent statistical overview of Lifelong learning programme: the Erasmus programme 2008/2009 (2010) stated that the total number of Erasmus students (for studies and placements combined) in the 2008/2009 academic year was 198,523 (an annual increase of 8.7%), of which 168,193 students studied abroad (an annual increase of 3.4% compared with 3.2% in the previous year). The objective is to reach at least three million individual participants in student mobility under the Erasmus programme and its predecessor programmes by 2012 (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2006). According to the statistical overview of Lifelong learning programme: the Erasmus programme 2008/2009 (2010), the two million target was reached at the end of the 2008/2009 academic year. Furthermore, projected trends for Erasmus student mobility show that the three million target will not be reached until the end of 2013 or early 2014. The ministers responsible for higher education in the 46 countries of the Bologna Process *called upon each country to increase mobility in their Communiqué of the conference of European ministers responsible for higher education* (2009). They also stated that *by 2020, at least 20% of those graduating in the European Higher Education Area should have had a study or training period abroad*. The statistical overview of Lifelong learning programme: the Erasmus programme 2008/2009 (2010) further reported that in the 2008/2009 academic year Erasmus students comprised 4.44% of all graduates (compared with 4.23% in 2007/2008).

Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana (2007) stated that *the trends in global student mobility contribute to a rapidly evolving market in international education, which, in turn, create new opportunities, challenges and an increasingly competitive higher education environment. The increased competition within the education sector, diminishing university funds and the introduction of new government-backed marketing campaigns to increase the number of international students at British universities, highlights the growing importance of branding within educational institutions*. The Council conclusions on the internalisation of higher education (2010) declared that member states are invited to increase the international attractiveness of higher education institutions by *improving their international visibility as interesting places to study and conduct research*.

¹ Available at: http://www.europeunit.ac.uk/eu_policy_education/lisbon_strategy.cfm [Accessed 29 December 2010].

The impact of Erasmus on European higher education (2008) further stated that a beneficial impact of Erasmus at an institutional level has been seen in a number of areas. These areas include the establishment of further development of institutional internalisation strategies, improvement of the international visibility and attractiveness of institutions, quality improvement in teaching and learning, increase in the participation of international projects and quality improvement in student services. In addition, the level of international mobility and internalisation is one criterion of a new system for funding public higher education institutions in the Czech Republic.² For example, the number of incoming and outgoing students under mobility programmes such as Erasmus and others is evaluated.

² More information on the new system of funding public universities in the Czech Republic can be found at: <http://www.radavs.cz/prilohy/5s5Pravidlafinancovani17052010.doc> [Accessed 29 December 2010].

3. Methods

In order to analyse a student's decision-making process in case of exchange programmes, eight individual surveys were carried out (see Table 1). The surveys called *Erasmus-EkF* were most significant for the analysis and the other ones played a rather complementary role.

The aim of the *Ex-Erasmus* research was to learn how study stays at the Faculty of Economics, VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava are perceived in order to identify strengths and weaknesses, and associations with the city of Ostrava and the Czech Republic. In addition, it examined how students had made the decision to stay abroad including the information sources consulted. Regarding the *Ex-Erasmus CZ* survey, Belgian students who studied the Czech language and who were obliged to spend their exchange stay in the Czech Republic were interviewed.

Table 1 Realised surveys

Survey		Target group	Sample (n)	Method
Ex-Erasmus	Ex-Erasmus CZ	Belgian students of the Czech language who spent their exchange stays in CZ	7	Focus group
	Ex-Erasmus BE	Belgian students who spent their exchange stays at EkF VŠB-TUO	4	In-depth interviews
Erasmus	Erasmus Gent	Exchange students who spent their exchange stays at Hogeschool Gent, Belgium	27	Questionnaire testing
	Erasmus EUR5	Exchange students who spent their exchange stays in different countries	30	Questionnaire testing
Erasmus-EkF	Erasmus-EkF WS	Exchange students at EkF in the winter semester of the 2009/2010 academic year	35	Questionnaire testing
	Erasmus-EkF SS	Exchange students at EkF in the winter semester of the 2009/2010 academic year	4	Questionnaire testing
Coordinator	Coordinator Gent	Coordinators of Hogeschool Gent, Belgium	3	In-depth interview
	Coordinator partner	Coordinators of partner universities of EkF VŠB-TUO	28	Questionnaire testing

Legend: CZ...Czech Republic; VŠB-TUO...VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava; EkF...Faculty of Economics, VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava

This sample included seven students who had spent their study periods in Prague (1), in Brno (2), in Olomouc (3) and in Ostrava (1). The focus group was held at the Hogeschool Gent, Belgium in March 2009. Concerning the *Ex-Erasmus BE* survey, in May and June 2009 four out of the six students of Hogeschool Gent, Belgium, who had spent their exchange stays at the Faculty of Economics, VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava in the 2005/2006 and 2007/2008 academic years were individually interviewed about how they perceived their study stays in Ostrava.

The *Erasmus* surveys aimed at analysing the behaviour of exchange students as a specific group of consumers. The research focused on identifying, for example, the reasons for choosing a particular destination, decision criteria, information sources and so on. The second aim was to analyse attitudes towards the Czech Republic and possible barriers why students do not consider the Czech Republic as a destination to study abroad. Questionnaire testing called *Erasmus Gent* was carried out among international students in Gent from May to June 2009. The sample was made up of 27 students from different countries that were studying in different fields. Regarding the *Erasmus EUR5* survey, students of the Faculty of Economics, VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava, who were at that time abroad on their exchange stays, were asked to arrange for fellow Erasmus students to complete questionnaires (maximum of eight questionnaires each). In total, 35 students in 11 countries and 13 cities were contacted in November 2009 with the aim of obtaining 115 respondents in total. Finally, 30 respondents (26%) from five countries – Germany (10), Spain (8), Belgium (7), Finland (4) and Ireland (1) – participated. For this reason, namely the lack of representativeness of the research, it was found that this particular research did not meet its goals and only the part concerning the Czech Republic was actually used.

The most important research for this paper, namely the *Erasmus EkF* surveys, was carried out from October to November 2009 and in April 2010. It was based on questionnaire testing with the aim of analysing decision-making process concerning exchange programmes of international students at the Faculty of Economics, VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava in the 2009/2010 academic year. The sample was made up of 39 out of 81 exchange students (47%): 35 (63%) in the winter semester and four (15%) in the summer semester.

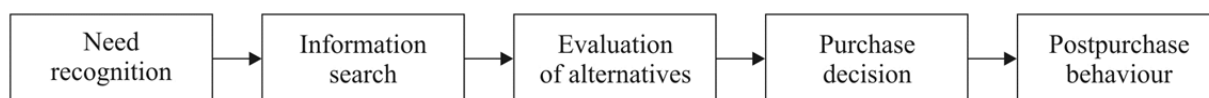
The aim of the *Coordinator* research was to make use of coordinators' knowledge of their potential outgoing students' decision-making processes as well

as their preferences, needs and expectations in order to identify possible barriers and the highlights of spending an exchange stay at the Faculty of Economics, VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava. Within the *Coordinator Gent* survey, three coordinators of Hogeschool Gent were individually interviewed from April to June 2009. With regard to the *Coordinator partner* questionnaire testing, the questionnaire was sent by email to 61 partner higher education institutions of the Faculty of Economics, VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava. The sample consisted of 28 coordinators from 27 universities (44%). This survey was held in May 2010.

4. A Student's Decision-Making Process

Consumer research helps develop strategies for market segmentation, targeting and positioning, and make decisions about marketing communications and other components of the marketing mix (Hoyer and MacInnis, 2010). Based on general definitions of consumer behaviour (Hoyer and MacInnis, 2010; Kardes et al., 2011) exchange student behaviour entails all student activities associated with the acquisition, consumption and disposition of an exchange study stay abroad, including the student's emotional, mental and behavioural responses that precede, determine or follow these activities. Hoyer and MacInnis (2010) explained that *consumer behaviour encompasses four domains: (1) the psychological core, (2) the process of making decisions, (3) the consumer's culture and (4) consumer behaviour outcomes*. The present paper concentrates on analysing a student's decision-making process in case of exchange programmes and attempts to identify the motives and sought benefits of studying abroad, the role of information sources and attitudes towards the Czech Republic and the Faculty of Economics, VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava. This is to help determine communications strategies and objectives, creative strategies, the selection of communications channels and tools.

The research findings are presented and structured according to the decision process (Figure 1). With regard to the character of the decision about where to study abroad and the purpose of this analysis, the two phases of the process – Evaluation of alternatives and Purchase decision – were analysed together. The decision about where to study abroad is individual and differs in every situation but it generally is long-term, complex and usually requires high involvement because the implications of the decision are personally and financially significant and concern a longer period of time.

**Figure 1** Decision Process

Source: Kotler and Armstrong (2010)

4.1 Need recognition

A number of needs and wants motivate young people to carry out an exchange stay abroad. The benefits are perceived individually and at different levels of intensity. Based on studies, the Commission of the European Communities (2009) claimed that students can strengthen their professional and personal development by accessing new knowledge, developing new linguistic skills and improving intercultural competences. According to Teichler (2004), temporary study abroad has *academic, cultural, linguistic and professional benefits combined with an interesting extracurricular life during the period spent abroad*. The author explained that students during their study periods abroad *learn in depth about another culture and society, often improve their foreign language proficiency, get to know another academic climate and possibly acquire knowledge that is more likely to be offered abroad than at home, and better qualified for a professional career abroad*. According to the research findings (Teichler, 2004), the reasons that had a strong influence on students' decisions to study abroad were *learning a foreign language, opportunity for self-development, wish to gain academic learning experience in another country, wish to improve career prospects, wish to travel and wish for a break from the usual surroundings*.

In spite of all the proven benefits of a stay abroad, the Commission of the European Communities (2009) stated that *the benefits of learning mobility may not be sufficiently understood among young people themselves* and that they *should be better explained in order young people become more open to mobility*. Moreover, the Committee of the Regions (2010) emphasised that *the individual responsibility of young people for overcoming obstacles to mobility by showing personal commitment and initiative* and drew attention to *the importance of measures which aim to*

encourage and promote the individual initiative of young people.

4.2 Information search

Kotler and Armstrong (2010) stated that most information is received by commercial sources but the most effective sources tend to be personal. The Committee of the Regions (2010) and the Commission of the European Communities (2009) also found that personal sources (teachers, trainers, youth workers, managers and former participants in mobility schemes) were crucial in promoting mobility. The findings of present surveys (*Erasmus EkF*) confirmed their significance in effecting the decision on the destination of an exchange stay abroad.

According to the research findings (*Erasmus EkF*), different sources of information may be more significant in different stages of the decision process (see Figure 2). In Figure 2, it is clear that more than half of respondents found out about the possibility of going to VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava from personal sources, namely their coordinators recommended they go there or they heard from friends that it is a good place to go. Over half (54%) of respondents spontaneously indicated the Internet as the most important source of information. Two-thirds stated that their decisions to spend their exchange stays at VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava were mainly affected by information from personal and internal sources. However, there is an assumption that this may vary for different institutions in different countries according to their attractiveness and reputation. Attractive destinations may not necessarily need their potential students to be persuaded by the 'personal' factor. For example, in the case of Gent (*Erasmus Gent* survey), respondents stated that they decided to go to Belgium after reading information about the country (13; 48%), after people around them convinced them that Belgium was the right place to go (9; 33%), after the

Table 1 Ranking of the sources of information according to their importance (*Erasmus EkF* surveys)

Ranking	Source of information	Average	Median	Mode
1	Personal sources	2.3	1.0	1.0
2	Internal sources – feelings and impressions	3.0	2.5	2.0
3	Internet – previous exchange students' experiences	3.4	3.0	2.0
4	Internet – general information about particular country, city, etc.	3.5	3.0	2.0
5	Internet – website of the host institution	3.7	4.0	5.0
6	Printed materials (brochures, etc.)	5.0	6.0	6.0

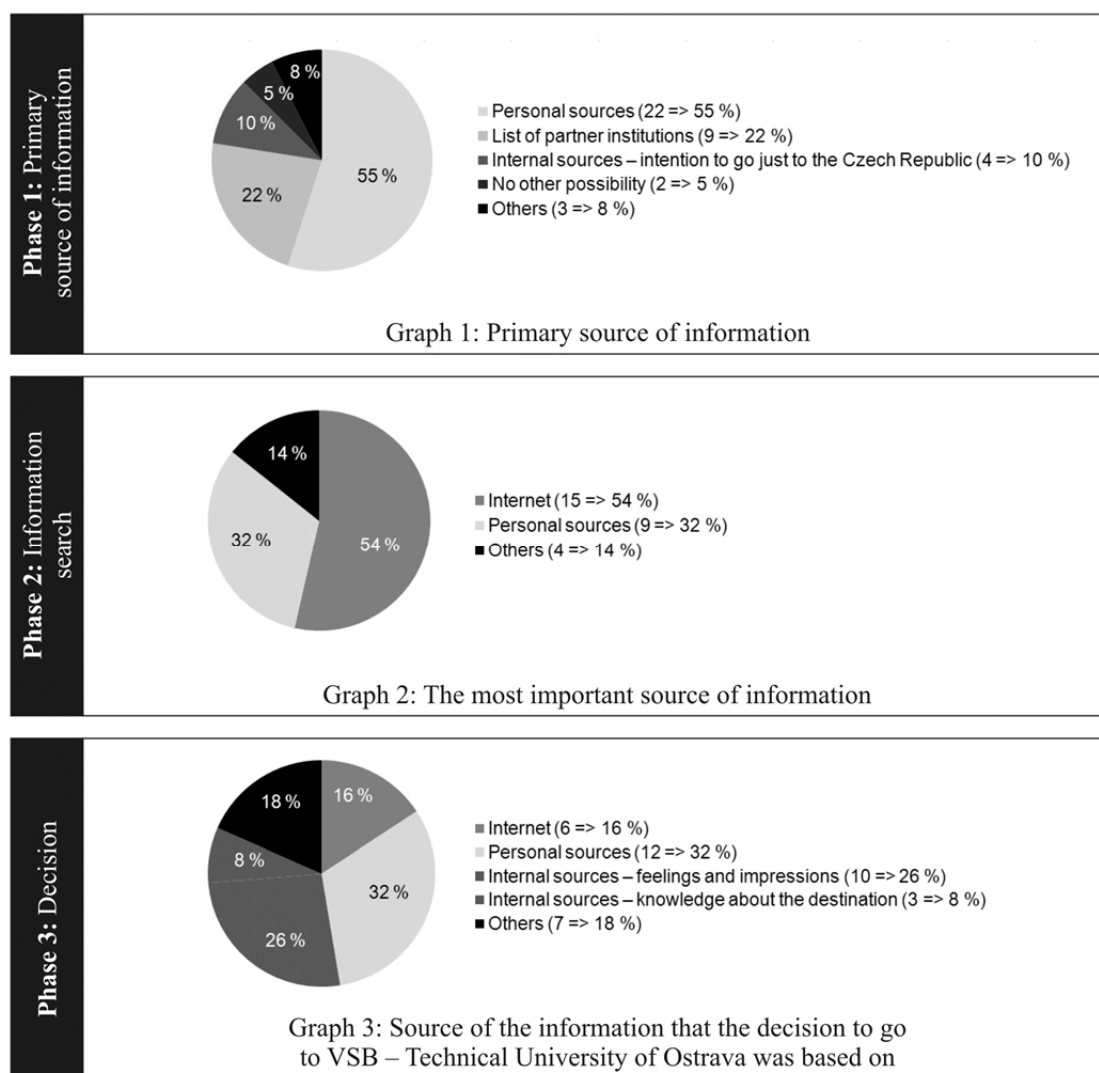


Figure 2 Significance of the sources of information in different phases of the decision process (*Erasmus EkF* surveys)

place itself impressed them (5; 19%) or that Belgium was the country where they always wanted to go (3; 11%).

Respondents cited all the concrete information sources they used for finding information. The host institution website was the most frequently visited, unless this source was indicated as the second least important (Table 2). Furthermore, no respondents named any of the tools developed by the EU such as Ploteus, which is a portal that helps students find out information about studying in Europe. Moreover, according to Sobková (2010), emotional rather than rational aspects affect the decision of where to study abroad.

4.3 Alternatives evaluation and purchase decision

The research findings (*Erasmus EkF*) revealed that the two main reasons why respondents had chosen VŠB –

Technical University of Ostrava were at the same time indicated as the highlights of studying at this university and belonged to the best evaluated characteristics of an exchange stay here. These were namely the low cost of living and the good position of the Czech Republic for travelling.

For the purpose of the research (*Erasmus EkF*) we suggested the several possible ways of making a decision on the destination of an exchange stay abroad (see Table 3). Respondents who had not had any particular place were to go evaluated the Czech Republic as the best destination for an exchange stay. By contrast, the Czech Republic obtained only an average assessment from those who had wanted to go just to the Czech Republic. Furthermore, respondents who chose the Faculty of Economics, VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava evaluated the Czech Republic as a destination of an exchange stay almost the same as did respondents who decided to spend

their study periods abroad in a different country (average mark: *Erasmus EkF* – 2.42; *Erasmus Gent* – 2.78; *Erasmus EUR5* – 2.96; 1 is the best, 5 is the worst).

The possible correlation between the approach to decision-making and the role of individual information sources was also shown (see Table 3), which could help understand the decision process and the role of information sources in communications strategy. However, the sample of respondents was too small and only exchange students at the Faculty of Economics, VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava in the 2009/2010 academic year were included in the research. Therefore, to verify the general validity of this

concept, broader, long-term research would be necessary.

In the next step, respondents chose and ranked the four most important decision-making criteria for studying abroad from a list according to their importance. The most important factor was given four points, the second most important three points, the third most important two points and the fourth most important one point (Table 4). Table 4 also distinguishes between students who decided on the Faculty of Economics, VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava and those who decided to spend their exchange stays somewhere else. The differences lie in the *cost of living* and *character of the country* criteria. However,

Table 2 Decision process (*Erasmus EkF* surveys)

Decision process	Count (n)	Source of information	The evaluation of the Czech Republic as the destination for an exchange stay abroad
The Czech Republic was chosen from the consideration set	11; 28.2%	Personal sources (<i>effect on decision</i>) + Internet (<i>the most important source of information</i>)	average 1.7 median 2.0 mode 2.0
Limited or no possibility of choice	8; 20.5%	Internet (<i>effect on decision</i>)	average 3.4 median 3.0 mode 3.0
No desired destination where to go	7; 18.0%	Personal sources (<i>the most important source of information</i>)	average 1.9 median 2.0 mode 1.0
He or she wanted to go just to the Czech Republic	6; 15.4%	Internal sources – feelings and impressions (<i>effect on decision</i>)	average 2.4 median 3.0 mode 3.0
Change of decision (the Czech Republic wasn't previously included in the consideration set)	5; 12.8%	-	average 3.3 median 3.0 mode 3.0
Other	2; 5.1%	-	average 3.0 median 3.0 mode -

Table 3 Decision criteria

Ranking	<i>Erasmus EkF</i> surveys		<i>Erasmus Gent</i> survey		<i>Erasmus EUR5</i> survey	
	Criteria	Points	Criteria	Points	Criteria	Points
1	Studying and offered studying programme	88	Studying and offered studying programme	56	Studying and offered studying programme	73
2	Cost of living	87	Possibilities to travel	48	Character of the country	48
3	Possibilities to travel	72	Character of the country	43	Possibilities to travel	37
4	Character of the country	53	Character of the city	37	Cost of living	30
5	Parties	27	Cost of living	33	Culture possibilities	30
6	Accommodation	13	Accommodation	16	Accommodation	14
7	Character of the city	13	Climate	14	Character of the city	12
8	Culture possibilities	9	Parties	13	Climate	6
9	Climate	9	Culture possibilities	9	Parties	5
10	Sport possibilities	2	Catering	1	Sport possibilities	3
11	Catering	1	Sport possibilities	0	<i>Approachable language*</i>	2

* Criteria named by respondent

with regard to the lack of representativeness of the *Erasmus Gent* and *Erasmus EUR5* surveys, the validity of this concept would have to be proven by broader research.

4.4 Evaluation of an exchange stay abroad (post-purchase behaviour)

Wilkie (1994) explained that *satisfaction/dissatisfaction refers to an emotional response to an evaluation of a product or service consumption experience*. If a product's perceived performance levels meet or exceed expectation levels, satisfaction is likely to result. Dissatisfaction occurs when actual outcomes fall below the expected levels of performance. Moreover, Wilkie (1994) stated that *if a consumer is quite inexperienced with a product, his or her expectations of performance are likely to be uncertain... thus a dissatisfaction outcome is less likely to occur*. According to the research findings (*Erasmus EkF* surveys), 82% of respondents had no previous experience with an exchange stay abroad. The National Agency for European Educational Programmes (NAEP) stated that every student can go abroad under the Erasmus programme (with or without an Erasmus grant) once during his or her higher education studies.³ The share of Erasmus students of all international students at the Faculty of Economics, VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava in 1998–2010 makes up on average about 75%. Teichler (2004) stated that only 2% of Erasmus students surveyed around 1990 and in the late 1990s said that they had been dissatisfied. In terms of the character of an exchange stay abroad, the conditions of the Erasmus programme and the share of exchange students without previous experience of a study stay abroad, overall dissatisfaction may be less likely to occur. Therefore, the findings concerning satisfaction with individual services that make up an exchange stay as a bundle of services should be rather used for evaluating and managing the offer of a university compared with general satisfaction.

5. Implications and Conclusion

A student behaviour analysis in the exchange programmes market is a study for a longer period of time. The aim of this paper was to help explain a student's decision-making process in case of exchange programmes. There is still a need for further analysis to better understand student behaviour in order for universities to design effective marketing strategies in the increasingly competitive education environment

and with regard to the rising significance of learning mobility.

Developing a communications and creative strategy should take into account the following research findings. Learning mobility has *academic, cultural, linguistic and professional benefits* combined with *an interesting extracurricular life during the period spent abroad* (Teichler, 2004). Despite all the proven benefits, they may not be sufficiently understood among young people (Commission of the European Communities, 2009) and also individual responsibility and initiative is emphasised (Committee of the Regions, 2010).

To design effective communications, information sources should be used according to the roles they actually play in the decision process. The Committee of the Regions (2010) and Commission of the European Communities (2009) found that personal sources – teachers, trainers, youth workers, managers and former participants in mobility schemes – are crucial in promoting mobility. There is an assumption that for different universities, according to their attractiveness and so-called *obviousness* as a destination of a study stay abroad, the significance and role of various information sources may differ. Attractive destinations may not necessarily need their potential incoming students to be persuaded by personal factors. In the case of the Faculty of Economics, VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava, personal sources tend to be the main source of primary information and have the biggest influence on the decision itself. However, its website, the most frequently used source of information, is according to the research findings of less importance. In addition, the significance and role of information sources may also differ according to the student's situation and the way of making a decision on where to study abroad. Respondents that had decided to spend their exchange stays in the Czech Republic in the way that they chose it from consideration set of possible destinations, indicated spontaneously the Internet as the most important source of information and personal sources as the most influential on the decision itself. Whereas respondents that had no desired destination in mind found personal sources to be the most important information source.

Based on this preliminary research, the Faculty of Economics, VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava could thus target its marketing and communications activities towards the segment of students that seeks a lower cost of living and good position for travelling. These factors were evaluated by respondents as the most important criteria when making a decision on an exchange stay. Moreover, these factors were also found as the highlights of spending an exchange stay

³ Available at: http://www.naep.cz/index.php?a=view-project-folder&project_folder_id=40& [Accessed 28 December 2010].

at the Faculty of Economics, VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava.

In terms of the character of an exchange study stay abroad, the conditions of Erasmus programme and the share of exchange students without previous experience with a study stay abroad, overall dissatisfaction may be less likely to occur. Therefore, analysing the performances of individual services can assist in managing a university offering in terms of its quality, satisfaction of current exchange students as a source of references for potential future students, competitiveness in the international higher education market and meeting the aims of learning mobility.

Finally, when planning and implementing a marketing communications strategy, the view of the demand side should be taken into consideration in order to design effective solutions, but the social responsibility of the higher education institution must be addressed as well.

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